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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MASERU 000222

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/S

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: 48 HOURS AND COUNTING - GOVERNMENT CONFIRMS SECURITY,
OPPOSITION LEADERS DROP OUT

REF: MASERU 215

CLASSIFIED BY: JUNE CARTER PERRY, AMBASSADOR, EXEC, STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary

1. (C) Deputy Prime Minister/Home Affairs Minister Lehohla met April 28 with diplomatic corps and donor representatives 48 hours before local government elections. He accepted a list of recent security incidents from the diplomatic corps and cited GOL needs for resources to battle criminal gangs. Addressing international community safety concerns on the April 30 polling day, the DPM confirmed the GOL had coordinated its security forces and was prepared to handle any potential incidents. He characterized the country's mood as one of "anticipation" and "healthy tension." While envoys were pleased to hear his reassurances, they remained both concerned about the capacity of the police and army to respond calmly and hopeful that events would proceed smoothly. The GOL appeared to feel in control of the situation despite the continuing public airing of grievances expressed by the opposition. Two days following a late April 26 meeting with the Diplomatic Corps, opposition party leaders have declared their members are free to vote, but they themselves will not participate. Limited though it may be, this is a good sign that donor pressure for the democratic process appears to have yielded results. End Summary

Diplomats Concerns

2. (C) At the request of the Diplomatic and donor communities, the DPM, who is also Minister of Home Affairs, received envoys April 28. Attendees were the U.S. and EU Ambassadors, the U.K.'s High Commissioner, the Irish Consul and the UNDP Resident Representative as well as the South African Mission's Counselor and the U.K.'s Deputy High Commissioner. The U.K.'s Commissioner, Frank Martin, speaking as Dean, presented a list of nine major life-threatening gang attacks on donor countries' personnel, including the vicious April 1 attack on an American citizen and similar attacks on German and Indian citizens as well as muggings of British citizens. The UN Resident Representative advised new security procedures at UN House and residences had been taken. The group queried the DPM about the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of Lesotho's police force to handle these attacks and the electoral crowds expected around the country on April 30.

Home Affairs' Limitations

3. (C) Concerning the capabilities of the local forces, the Minister acknowledged serious deficiencies in both rapid reaction and investigatory techniques. He pleaded for donor assistance. Both we and the British reminded the GOL of our successful law enforcement education programs (specifically ILEA) which had helped to professionalize Basotho officers. On the issue of peacefully handling any election related protests, the DPM said the Lesotho Defense Force, National Police and Intelligence personnel would effectively intervene should there be any disruptions. He went so far as to say potentially difficult opposition members who had called for postponement of

the elections would be followed, if necessary; Lesotho did not want "another 1998" period of violence. (Note: We obtained a copy of the Prime Minister's letter to the opposition dated April 28 refusing postponement of elections which would be an impediment to "deepening democracy.")

Opposition Pulls Back, Gives Okay to Members

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14. (C) The GOL's security task has become, we believe, somewhat less daunting. After much prodding by the diplomatic corps and other donors (including during a rather contentious late April 26 meeting), the major 11 opposition leaders (of the 24 parties) held an April 28 press conference giving their party members "permission" to vote on Saturday. However, they stated they themselves would not participate. The continued to air grievances primarily about the demarcation and other matters (see septel) but backed off their earlier calls for total boycott and postponement.

Atmospherics and Comment

15. (C) Toward the end of our discussion, Ambassador asked the DPM how he would characterize the country's mood. After reflection, he called it "one of anticipation" and "healthy tension." We were reminded of comments by several small, grassroots rural party leaders who have told us their people want "freedom" and for "the elections to be done." Informal polling of citizens in the capital suggests some degree of apathy by under 30 voters who say they prefer "music stations" to call-in election radio debates. Thus, turnout level predictions very widely.

16. (C) The Opposition's grudging acceptance of the fact that the train has left the station at least sets the stage for one more step in the institutionalization of democracy, albeit not perfect. End Comment.